

## FRANÇOIS MARIE AROUET DE VOLTAIRE (1694-1778)

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VOLTAIRE, FRANCOIS MARIE AROUET DE. French philosopher, historian, dramatist and man of letters, whose real name was François Marie Arouet simply, was born on the 21st of November 1694 at Paris, and was baptized the next day. His father was François Arouet, a notary; his mother was Marie Marguerite Daumart or D'Aumard. Both father and mother were of Poitevin extraction, but the Arouets had been for two generations established in Paris, the grandfather being a prosperous tradesman. The family appear to have always belonged to the yeoman-tradesman class; their special home was the town of Saint-Loup. Voltaire was the fifth child of his parents—twin boys (of whom one survived), a girl, Marguerite Catherine, and another boy who died young, having preceded him. Not very much is known of the mother, who died when Voltaire was but seven years old. She pretty certainly was the chief cause of his early introduction to good society, the Abbé de Châteauneuf (his sponsor in more ways than one) having been her friend. The father appears to have been somewhat peremptory in temper, but neither inhospitable nor tyrannical. Marguerite Arouet, of whom her younger brother was very fond, married early, her husband's name being Mignot; the elder brother, Armand, was a strong Jansenist, and there never was any kind of sympathy between him and François.

The Abbé de Châteauneuf instructed him early in *belles lettres* and deism, and he showed when a child the unsurpassed faculty for facile verse-making which always distinguished him. At the age of ten he was sent to the College Louis-le-Grand, which was under the management of the Jesuits, and remained there till 1711. It was his whim, as part of his general liberalism, to depreciate the education he received; but it seems to have been a very sound and good education, which formed the basis of his extraordinarily wide, though never

extraordinarily accurate, collection of knowledge subsequently, and (a more important thing) disciplined and exercised his literary faculty and judgment. Nor can there be much doubt that the great attention bestowed on acting—the Jesuits kept up the Renaissance practice of turning schools into theatres for the performance of plays both in Latin and in the vernacular—had much to do with Voltaire’s lifelong devotion to the stage. It must have been in his very earliest school years that the celebrated presentation of him by his godfather to Ninon de Lenclos took place, for Ninon died in 1705. She left him two thousand francs “to buy books with.” He worked fairly, played fairly, lived comfortably, made good and lasting friends. Some curious traits are recorded of this life—one being that in the terrible famine year of Malplaquet a hundred francs a year were added to the usual boarding expenses, and yet the boys had to eat *pain bis*.

In August 1711, at the age of seventeen, he came home, and the usual battle followed between a son who desired no profession but literature and a father who refused to consider literature a profession at all. For a time Voltaire submitted, and read law at least nominally. The Abbé de Châteauneuf died before his godson left school, but he had already introduced him to the famous and dissipated coterie of the Temple, of which the grand prior Vendôme was the head, and the poets Chaulieu and La Fare the chief literary stars. It does not appear that Voltaire got into any great scrapes; but his father tried to break him off from such society by sending him first to Caen and then, in the suite of the marquis de Châteauneuf, the abbe’s brother, to the Hague. Here he met a certain Olympe Dunoyer (“Pimpette”), a girl apparently of respectable character and not bad connections, but a Protestant, penniless, and daughter of a literary lady whose literary reputation was not spotless. The mother discouraged the affair, and, though Voltaire tried to avail himself of the mania for proselytizing which then distinguished France, his father stopped any idea of a match by procuring a *lettre de cachet*, which, however, he did not use. Voltaire, who had been sent home, submitted, and for a time pretended to work in a Parisian lawyers office; but he again manifested a faculty for getting into trouble—this time in the still more dangerous way of writing libelous poems—so that his father was glad to send him to stay for nearly a year (1714-15) with Louis de Caumartin, marquis de Saint-Ange, in the country. Here he was still supposed to study law, but devoted himself in part to literary essays, in part to storing up his immense treasure of gossiping history. Almost exactly at the time of the death of Louis XIV. he returned to Paris, to fall once more into literary and Templar society, and to

make the tragedy of *OEdipe*, which he had already written, privately known. He was now introduced to a less questionable and even more distinguished coterie than Vendômes, to the famous “court of Sceaux,” the circle of the beautiful and ambitious duchesse du Maine. It seems that Voltaire lent himself to the duchess’s frantic hatred of the regent Orleans, and helped to compose lampoons on that prince. At any rate, in May 1716 he was exiled, first to Tulle, then to Sully. Allowed to return, he again fell under suspicion of having been concerned in the composition of two violent libels—one in Latin and one in French—called from their first words the *Puero Regnante* and the *J’ai vu*, was inveigled by a spy named Beauregard into a real or burlesque confession, and on the 16th of May 1717 was sent to the Bastille. He there recast *OEdipe*, began the *Henriade* and determined to alter his name. Ever after his exit from the Bastille in April 1718 he was known as Arouet de Voltaire, or simply Voltaire, though legally he never abandoned his patronymic. The origin of the famous name has been much debated, and attempts have been made to show that it actually existed in the Daumart pedigree or in some territorial designation. Some are said to maintain that it was an abbreviation of a childish nickname, “*le petit volontaire*.” The balance of opinion has, however, always inclined to the hypothesis of an anagram on the name “Arouet le jeune,” or “Arouet l. j.,” *u* being changed to *v* and *j* to *i* according to the ordinary rules of the game.

A further “exile” at Châtenay and elsewhere succeeded the imprisonment, and though Voltaire was admitted to an audience by the regent and treated graciously he was not trusted. *OEdipe* was acted at the Théâtre Français on the 18th of November of the year of release, and was very well received, a rivalry between parties not dissimilar to that which not long before had helped Addison’s *Cato* assisting its success. It had a run of forty-five nights, and brought the author not a little profit. With these gains Voltaire seems to have begun his long series of successful financial speculations. But in the spring of next year the production of Lagrange-Chancels libels, entitled the *Philippiques*, again brought suspicion on him. He was informally exiled, and spent much time with Marshal Villars, again increasing his store of “reminiscences.” He returned to Paris in the winter, and his second play, *Artémire*, was produced in February 1720. It was a failure, and though it was recast with some success Voltaire never published it as a whole, and used parts of it in other work. He again spent much of [200] his time with Villars, listening to the marshals stories and making harmless love to the duchess. In December 1721 his father died, leaving him

property (rather more than four thousand livres a year), which was soon increased by a pension of half the amount from the regent. In return for this, or in hopes of more, he offered himself as a spy or at any rate as a secret diplomatist to Dubois. But meeting his old enemy Beauregard in one of the ministers rooms and making an offensive remark, he was waylaid by Beauregard some time after in a less privileged place and soundly beaten.

His visiting espionage, as unkind critics put it—his secret diplomatic mission, as he would have liked to have it put himself—began in the summer of 1722, and he set out for it in company with a certain Madame de Rupelmonde, to whom he as usual made love, taught deism and served as an amusing traveling companion. He stayed at Cambrai for some time, where European diplomatists were still in full session, journeyed to Brussels, where he met and quarreled with Jean Baptiste Rousseau, went on to the Hague, and then returned. The *Henriade* had got on considerably during the journey, and, according to his lifelong habit, the poet, with the help of his friend Thiériot and others, had been working the oracle of puffery. During the late autumn and winter of 1722-23 he abode chiefly in Paris, taking a kind of lodging in the town house of M. de Bernières, a nobleman of Rouen, and endeavoring to procure a “privilege” for his poem. In this he was disappointed, but he had the work printed at Rouen nevertheless, and spent the summer of 1723 revising it. In November he caught smallpox and was very seriously ill, so that the book was not given to the world till the spring of 1724 (and then of course, as it had no privilege, appeared privately). Almost at the same time, the 4th of March, his third tragedy, *Mariamne* appeared, was well received at first, but underwent complete damnation before the curtain fell. The regent had died shortly before, not to Voltaire’s advantage; for he had been a generous patron. Voltaire had made, however, a useful friend in another grand seigneur, as profligate and nearly as intelligent, the duke of Richelieu, and with him he passed 1724 and the next year chiefly, recasting *Mariamne* (which was now successful), writing the comedy of *L’Indiscret*, and courting the queen, the ministers, the favorites and everybody who seemed worth. The end of 1725 brought a disastrous close to this period of his life. He was insulted by the chevalier de Rohan, replied with his usual sharpness of tongue, and shortly afterwards, when dining with the duke of Sully, was called out and bastinadoed by the chevaliers hirelings, Rohan himself looking on. Nobody would take his part, and at last, nearly three months after the outrage, he challenged Rohan, who accepted the challenge, but on the morning appointed for the duel Voltaire

was arrested and sent for the second time to the Bastille. He was kept in confinement a fortnight, and was then packed off to England in accordance with his own request. Voltaire revenged himself on the duke of Sully for his conduct towards his guest by cutting Maximilien de Béthunes name out of the *Henriade*.

No competent judges have ever mistaken the importance of Voltaire's visit to England, and the influence it exercised on his future career. In the first place, the ridiculous and discreditable incident of the beating had time to blow over; in the second, England was a very favorable place for Frenchmen of note to pick up guineas; in the third, and most important of all, his contact with a people then far more different in every conceivable way from their neighbors than any two peoples of Europe are different now, acted as a sovereign tonic and stimulant on his intellect and literary faculty. Before the English visit Voltaire had been an elegant trifler, an adept in the forms of literature popular in French society, a sort of superior Dorat or Boufflers of earlier growth. He returned from that visit one of the foremost literary men in Europe, with views, if not profound or accurate, yet wide and acute on all *les grands sujets*, and with a solid stock of money. The visit lasted about three years, from 1726 to 1729; and, as if to make the visitors luck certain, George I. died and George II. succeeded soon after his arrival. The new king was not fond of poetry, but Queen Caroline was, and international jealousy was pleased at the thought of welcoming a distinguished exile from French illiberality. The Walpoles, Bubb Dodington, Bolingbroke, Congreve, Sarah, duchess of Marlborough, Pope, were among his English friends. He made acquaintance with, and at least tried to appreciate, Shakespeare. He was much struck by English manners, was deeply penetrated by English toleration for personal free-thought and eccentricity, and gained some thousands of pounds from an authorized English edition of the *Henriade*, dedicated to the queen. But he visited Paris now and then without permission, and his mind, like the mind of every exiled Frenchman, was always set thereon. He gained full license to return in the spring of 1729.

He was full of literary projects, and immediately after his return he is said to have increased his fortune immensely by a lucky lottery speculation. The *Henriade* was at last licensed in France; *Brutus*, a play which he had printed in England, was accepted for performance, but kept back for a time by the author; and he began the celebrated poem of the *Pucelle*, the amusement and the torment of great part of his life. But he had great difficulties with two of his chief works

which were ready to appear, *Charles XII.* and the *Lettres sur les Anglais.* With both he took all imaginable pains to avoid offending the censorship; for Voltaire had, more than any other man who ever lived, the ability and the willingness to stoop to conquer. At the end of 1730 *Brutus* did actually get acted. Then in the spring of the next year he went to Rouen to get *Charles XII.* surreptitiously printed, which he accomplished. In 1732 another tragedy, *Eriphile*, appeared, with the same kind of halting success which had distinguished the appearance of its elder sisters since *OEdipe*. But at last, on the 13th of August 1732, he produced *Zaire*, the best (with *Mérope*) of all his plays, and one of the ten or twelve best plays of the whole French classical school. Its motive was borrowed to some extent from *Othello*, but that matters little. In the following winter the death of the comtesse de Fontaine-Martel, whose guest he had been, turned him out of a comfortable abode. He then took lodgings with an agent of his, one Demoulin, in an out-of-the-way part of Paris, and was, for some time at least, as much occupied with contracts, speculation and all sorts of means of gaining money as with literature.

In the middle of this period, however, in 1733, two important books, the *Lettres philosophiques sur les Anglais* and the *Temple du goût* appeared. Both were likely to make bad blood, for the latter was, under the mask of easy verse, a satire on contemporary French literature, especially on J. B. Rousseau, and the former was, in the guise of a criticism or rather panegyric of English ways, an attack on everything established in the church and state of France. It was published with certain remarks on Pascal, more offensive to orthodoxy than itself, and no mercy was shown to it. The book was condemned (June 10th, 1734), the copies seized and burnt, a warrant issued against the author and his dwelling searched. He himself was safe in the independent duchy of Lorraine with Emilie de Breteuil, marquise du Châtelet, with whom he began to be intimate in 1733; he had now taken up his abode with her at the château of Cirey.

If the English visit may be regarded as having finished [201] Voltaire's education, the Cirey residence may be justly said to be the first stage of his literary manhood. He had written important and characteristic work before; but he had always been in a kind of literary *Wanderjahre*. He now obtained a settled home for many years and, taught by his numerous brushes with the authorities, he began and successfully carried out that system of keeping out of personal harms way, and of at once denying any awkward responsibility, which made him for nearly half a century at once the chief and the most prosperous of European

heretics in regard to all established ideas. It was not till the summer of 1734 that Cirey, a half-dismantled country house on the borders of Champagne and Lorraine, was fitted up with Voltaire's money and became the headquarters of himself, of his hostess, and now and then of her accommodating husband. Many pictures of the life here, some of them not a little malicious, survive. It was not entirely a bed of roses, for the "respectable Emily's temper" was violent, and after a time she sought lovers who were not so much *des cérébraux* as Voltaire. But it provided him with a safe and comfortable retreat, and with every opportunity for literary work. In March 1735 the ban was formally taken off him, and he was at liberty to return to Paris, a liberty of which he availed himself sparingly.

At Cirey he wrote indefatigably and did not neglect business. The principal literary results of his early years here were the *Discours en vers sur l'homme*, the play of *Alzire* and *L'Enfant prodigue* (1736), and a long treatise on the Newtonian system which he and Madame du Châtelet wrote together. But, as usual, Voltaire's extraordinary literary industry was shown rather in a vast amount of fugitive writings than in substantive works, though for the whole space of his Cirey residence he was engaged in writing, adding to, and altering the *Pucelle*. In the very first days of his sojourn he had written a pamphlet with the imposing title of *Treatise on Metaphysics*. Of metaphysics proper Voltaire neither then nor at any other time understood anything, and the subject, like every other, merely served him as a pretext for laughing at religion with the usual reservation of a tolerably affirmative deism. In March 1736 he received his first letter from Frederick of Prussia, then crown prince only. He was soon again in trouble, this time for the poem of *Le Mondain*, and he at once crossed the frontier and then made for Brussels. He spent about three months in the Low Countries, and in March 1737 returned to Cirey, and continued writing, making experiments in physics (he had at this time a large laboratory), and busying himself with iron-founding, the chief industry of the district. The best-known accounts of Cirey life, those of Madame de Grafigny, date from the winter of 1738-39; they are somewhat spiteful but very amusing, depicting the frequent quarrels between Madame du Châtelet and Voltaire, his intense suffering under criticism, his constant dread of the surreptitious publication of the *Pucelle* (which nevertheless he could not keep his hands from writing or his tongue from reciting to his visitors), and so forth. The chief and most galling of his critics at this time was the Abbé Desfontaines, and the chief of Desfontaines's attacks was entitled *La*

*Voltaire* in reply to a libel of Voltaire's called *Le Préservatif*. Both combatants had, according to the absurd habit of the time, to disown their works, Desfontaines's disavowal being formal and procured by the exertion of all Voltaire's own influence both at home and abroad. For he had as little notion of tolerance towards others as of dignity in himself. In April 1739 a journey was made to Brussels, to Paris, and then again to Brussels, which was the headquarters for a considerable time, owing to some law affairs, of the Du Châtelets. Frederick, now king of Prussia, made not a few efforts to get Voltaire away from Madame du Châtelet, but unsuccessfully, and the king earned the lady's cordial hatred by persistently refusing or omitting to invite her. At last, in September 1740, master and pupil met for the first time at Cleves, an interview followed three months later by a longer visit. Brussels was again the headquarters in 1741, by which time Voltaire had finished the best and the second or third best of his plays, *Mérope* and *Mahomet*. *Mahomet* was played first at Lille in that year; it did not appear in Paris till August next year, and *Mérope* not till 1743. This last was, and deserved to be, the most successful of its authors whole theatre. It was in this same year that he received the singular diplomatic mission to Frederick which nobody seems to have taken seriously, and after his return the oscillation between Brussels, Cirey and Paris was resumed. During these years much of the *Essai sur les mœurs* and the *Siècle de Louis XIV.* was composed. He also returned, not too well advisedly, to the business of courtiership, which he had given up since the death of the regent. He was much employed, owing to Richelieu's influence, in the fetes of the dauphin's marriage, and was rewarded through the influence of Madame de Pompadour on New Years Day 1745 by the appointment to the post of historiographer-royal, once jointly held by Racine and Boileau. The situation itself and its accompanying privileges were what Voltaire chiefly aimed at, but there was a salary of two thousand livres attached, and he had the year before come in for three times as much by the death of his brother. In the same year he wrote a poem on Fontenoy, he received medals from the pope and dedicated *Mahomet* to him, and he wrote court *divertissements* and other things to admiration. But he was not a thoroughly skilful courtier, and one of the best known of Voltairiana is the contempt or at least silence with which Louis XV.—a sensualist but no fool—received the maladroit and almost insolent inquiry *Trajan est-il content?* addressed in his hearing to Richelieu at the close of a piece in which the emperor had appeared with a transparent reference to the king. All this attention had at least one effect. He, who had been for years admittedly the first writer in France, had been repeatedly passed over in elections to the Academy. He was at last



elected in the spring of 1746, and received on the 9th of May. Then the tide began to turn. His favor at court had naturally exasperated his enemies; it had not secured him any real friends, and even a gentlemanship of the chamber was no solid benefit, except from the money point of view. He did not indeed hold it very long, but was permitted to sell it for a large sum, retaining the rank and privileges. He had various proofs of the instability of his hold on the king during 1747 and in 1748. He once lay in hiding for two months with the duchesse du Maine at Sceaux, where were produced the comedietta of *La Prude* and the tragedy of *Rome sauvée*, and afterwards for a time lived chiefly at Lunéville; here Madame du Châtelet had established herself at the court of King Stanislaus, and carried on a liaison with Saint-Lambert, an officer in the king's guard. In September 1749 she died after the birth of a child.

The death of Madame du Châtelet is another turning-point in the history of Voltaire. He was fifty-five, but he had nearly thirty years more to live, and he had learnt much during what may be called his Cirey cohabitation. For some time, however, after Madame du Châtelet's death he was in a state of pitiable unsettlement. At first, after removing his goods from Cirey, he hired the greater part of the Châtelet town house, and then the whole. He had some idea of settling down in Paris, and might perhaps have done so if mischief had not been the very breath of his nostrils. He went on writing satiric tales like *Zadig*. He engaged in a foolish and undignified struggle with Crébillon *père* (not *filis*), a rival set up against him by Madame de Pompadour, but a dramatist who, in part of one play, *Rhadamiste et Zénobie*, has struck a note of tragedy in the grand Cornelian strain, which Voltaire could never hope to echo. *Semirame* (1748), *Oreste* (1750) and *Rome sauvée* itself were all products of this rivalry. He used the most extraordinary efforts to make himself more popular than he was, but he could not help being uncomfortable.

All this time Frederick of Prussia had been continuing his invitations. Voltaire left Paris on the 15th of June 1751, and reached Berlin on the 10th of July. This Berlin visit is more or less familiar to English readers from the two great essays of Macaulay and Carlyle as well as from the *Frederick* of the [202] latter. But these two masters of English were not perhaps the best qualified to relate the story. Both were unjust to Voltaire, and Macaulay was unjust to Frederick as well. It is certain that at first the king behaved altogether like a king to his guest. He pressed him to remain; he gave him (the words are Voltaire's own) one of his

orders, twenty thousand francs a year, and four thousand additional for his niece, Madame Denis, in case she would come and keep house for her uncle. But Voltaire's conduct was from the first Voltairian. He insisted on the consent of his own king, which was given without delay. But Frenchmen, always touchy on such a point, regarded Voltaire as something of a deserter; and it was not long before he bitterly repented his desertion, though his residence in Prussia lasted nearly three years. It was quite impossible that Voltaire and Frederick should get on together for long. Voltaire was not humble enough to be a mere butt, as many of Frederick's led poets were; he was not enough of a gentleman to hold his own place with dignity and discretion; he was constantly jealous both of his equals in age and reputation, such as Maupertuis, and of his juniors and inferiors, such as Baculard D'Arnaud. He was greedy, restless, and in a way Bohemian. Frederick, though his love of teasing for teasing's sake has been exaggerated by Macaulay, was a martinet of the first water, had a sharp though one-sided idea of justice, and had not the slightest intention of allowing Voltaire to insult or to tyrannize over his other guests and servants. If he is to be blamed in this particular matter, the blame must be chiefly confined to his imprudence in inviting Voltaire at the beginning and to the brutality of his conduct at the end. Within Voltaire there was always a mischievous and ill-behaved child; and he was never more mischievous, more ill-behaved and more childish than in these years. He tried to get D'Arnaud exiled, and succeeded. He got into a quite unnecessary quarrel with Lessing. He had not been in the country six months before he engaged in a discreditable piece of financial gambling with Hirsch, the Dresden Jew. He was accused of something like downright forgery that is to say, of altering a paper signed by Hirsch after he had signed it. The king's disgust at this affair (which came to an open scandal before the tribunals) was so great that he was on the point of ordering Voltaire out of Prussia, and Darget the secretary had no small trouble in arranging the matter (February 1751). Then it was Voltaire's turn to be disgusted with an occupation he had undertaken himself—the occupation of “buckwashing” the king's French verses. However, he succeeded in finishing and printing the *Siècle de Louis XIV.*, while the *Dictionnaire philosophique* is said to have been devised and begun at Potsdam. But Voltaire's restless temper was brewing up for another storm. In the early autumn of 1751 La Mettrie, one of the king's parasites, and a man of much more talent than is generally allowed, horrified Voltaire by telling him that Frederick had in conversation applied to him (Voltaire) a proverb about “sucking the orange and flinging away its skin,” and about the same time the dispute with Maupertuis, which had more than anything else to do with his exclusion from Prussia, came to a head. Maupertuis

got into a dispute with one König. The king took his president's part; Voltaire took König's. But Maupertuis must needs write his Letters, and thereupon (1752) appeared one of Voltaire's most famous, though perhaps not one of his most read works, the *Diatribes du Docteur Akakia*. Even Voltaire did not venture to publish this lampoon on a great official of a prince so touchy as the king of Prussia without some permission, and if all tales are true he obtained this by another piece of something like forgery—getting the king to endorse a totally different pamphlet on its last leaf, and affixing that last leaf to *Akakia*. Of this Frederick was not aware; but he did get some wind of the *Diatribes* itself, sent for the author, heard it read to his own great amusement, and either actually burned the MS. or believed that it was burnt. In a few days printed copies appeared. Frederick did not like disobedience, but he still less liked being made a fool of, and he put Voltaire under arrest. But again the affair blew over, the king believing that the edition of *Akakia* confiscated in Prussia was the only one. Alas! Voltaire had sent copies away; others had been printed abroad; and the thing was irrecoverable. It could not be proved that he had ordered the printing, and all Frederick could do was to have the pamphlet burnt by the hangman. Things were now drawing to a crisis. One day Voltaire sent his orders, &c., back; the next Frederick returned them, but Voltaire had quite made up his mind to fly. A kind of reconciliation occurred in March, and after some days of good-fellowship Voltaire at last obtained the long-sought leave of absence and left Potsdam on the 26th of the month (1753). It was nearly three months afterwards that the famous, ludicrous and brutal arrest was made at Frankfort, on the persons of himself and his niece, who had met him meanwhile. There was some faint excuse for Frederick's wrath. In the first place, the poet chose to linger at Leipzig. In the second place, in direct disregard of a promise given to Frederick, a supplement to *Akakia* appeared, more offensive than the main text. From Leipzig, after a month's stay, Voltaire moved to Gotha. Once more, on the 25th of May, he moved on to Frankfort. Frankfort, nominally a free city, but with a Prussian resident who did very much what he pleased, was not like Gotha and Leipzig. An excuse was provided in the fact that the poet had a copy of some unpublished poems of Frederick's, and as soon as Voltaire arrived hands were laid on him, at first with courtesy enough. The resident, Freytag, was not a very wise person (though he probably did not, as Voltaire would have it, spell "poésie" "poéshie"); constant references to Frederick were necessary; and the affair was prolonged so that Madame Denis had time to join her uncle. At last Voltaire tried to steal away. He was followed, arrested, his niece seized separately, and sent to join him in custody; and the two, with the secretary

Collini, were kept close prisoners at an inn called the Goat. This situation was at last put an end to by the city authorities, who probably felt that they were not playing a very creditable part. Voltaire left Frankfort on the 7th of July, traveled safely to Mainz, and thence to Mannheim, Strasburg and Colmar. The last-named place he reached (after a leisurely journey and many honors at the little courts just mentioned) at the beginning of October, and here he proposed to stay the winter, finish his *Annals of the Empire* and look about him.

Voltaire's second stage was now over. Even now, however, in his sixtieth year, it required some more external pressure to induce him to make himself independent. He had been, in the first blush of his Frankfort disaster, refused, or at least not granted, permission even to enter France proper. At Colmar he was not safe, especially when in January 1754 a pirated edition of the *Essai sur les mœurs*, written long before, appeared. Permission to establish himself in France was now absolutely refused. Nor did an extremely offensive performance of Voltaire's—the solemn partaking of the Eucharist at Colmar after due confession—at all mollify his enemies. His exclusion from France, however, was chiefly metaphorical, and really meant exclusion from Paris and its neighborhood. In the summer he went to Plombières, and after returning to Colmar for some time journeyed in the beginning of winter to Lyons, and thence in the middle of December to Geneva. Voltaire had no purpose of remaining in the city, and almost immediately bought a country house just outside the gates, to which he gave the name of Les Délices. He was here practically at the meeting-point of four distinct jurisdictions Geneva, the canton Vaud, Sardinia and France, while other cantons were within easy reach; and he bought other houses dotted about these territories, so as never to be without a refuge close at hand in case of sudden storms. At Les Délices he set up a considerable establishment, which his great wealth made him able easily to afford. He kept open house for visitors; he had printers close at hand in Geneva; he fitted up a private theatre in which he could enjoy what was perhaps the greatest pleasure of his whole life—acting in a play of his [203] own, stage-managed by himself. His residence at Geneva brought him into correspondence (at first quite amicable) with the most famous of her citizens, J. J. Rousseau. His *Orphelin de la Chine*, performed at Paris in 1755, was very well received; the notorious *La Pucelle* appeared in the same year. The earthquake at Lisbon, which appalled other people, gave Voltaire an excellent opportunity for ridiculing the beliefs of the orthodox, first in verse (1756) and later in the (from a literary point of view)

unsurpassable tale of *Candide* (1759). All was, however, not yet quite smooth with him. Geneva had a law expressly forbidding theatrical performances in any circumstances whatever. Voltaire had infringed this law already as far as private performances went, and he had thought of building a regular theatre, not indeed at Geneva but at Lausanne. In July 1755 a very polite and, as far as Voltaire was concerned, indirect resolution of the Consistory declared that in consequence of these proceedings of the Sieur de Voltaire the pastors should notify their flocks to abstain, and that the chief syndic should be informed of the Consistory's perfect confidence that the edicts would be carried out. Voltaire obeyed this hint as far as Les Délices was concerned, and consoled himself by having the performances in his, Lausanne house. But he never was the man to take opposition to his wishes either quietly or without retaliation. He undoubtedly instigated D'Alembert to include a censure of the prohibition in his *Encyclopédie* article on "Geneva," a proceeding which provoked Rousseau's celebrated *Lettre 4 D'Alembert sur les spectacles*. As for himself, he looked about for a place where he could combine the social liberty of France with the political liberty of Geneva, and he found one.

At the end of 1758 he bought the considerable property of Ferney, on the shore of the lake, about four miles from Geneva, and on French soil. At Les Délices (which he sold in 1765) he had become a householder on no small scale; at Ferney (which he increased by other purchases and leases) he became a complete country gentleman, and was henceforward known to all Europe as squire of Ferney. Many of the most celebrated men of Europe visited him there, and large parts of his usual biographies are composed of extracts from their accounts of Ferney. his new occupations by no means quenched his literary activity. He did not make himself a slave to his visitors, but reserved much time for work and for his immense correspondence, which had for a long time once more included Frederick, the two getting on very well when they were not in contact. Above all, he now; being comparatively secure in position, engaged much more strongly in public controversies, and resorted less to his old labyrinthine tricks of disavowal, garbled publication and private libel. The suppression of the *Encyclopédie*, to which he had been a considerable contributor, and whose conductors were his intimate friends, drew from him a shower of lampoons directed now at "l'infâme" (see *infra*) generally, now at literary victims, such as Le Franc de Pompignan (who had written one piece of verse so much better than anything serious of Voltaire's that he could not be forgiven), or Palissot (who in his play

*Les Philosophes* had boldly gibbeted most of the persons so termed, but had not included Voltaire), now at Fréron, an excellent critic and a dangerous writer, who had attacked Voltaire from the conservative side, and at whom the patriarch of Ferney, as he now began to be called, leveled in return the very inferior farce-lampoon of *L'Écossaise*, of the first night of which Fréron himself did an admirably humorous criticism.

How he built a church and got into trouble in so doing at Ferney, how he put "Deo erexit Voltaire" on it (1760-61) and obtained a relic from the pope for his new building, how he entertained a grand-niece of Corneille, and for her benefit wrote his well-known "commentary" on that poet, are matters of interest, but to be passed over briefly. Here, too, he began that series of interferences on behalf of the oppressed and the ill-treated which, whatever mixture of motives may have prompted it, is an honor to his memory. Volumes and almost libraries have been written on the Calas affair, and we can but refer here to the only less famous cases of Sirven (very similar to that of Calas, though no judicial murder was actually committed), Espinasse (who had been sentenced to the galleys for harboring a Protestant minister), Lally (the son of the unjustly treated but not blameless Irish-French commander in India), D'Étalonde (the companion of La Barre) Montbailli and others. In 1768 he entered into controversy with the bishop of the diocese; he had differences with the superior landlord of part of his estate, the president De Brosses; and he engaged in a long and tedious return match with the republic of Geneva. But the general events of this Ferney life are somewhat of that happy kind which are no events.

In this way Voltaire, who had been an old man when he established himself at Ferney, became a very old one almost without noticing it. The death of Louis XV. and the accession of Louis XVI. excited even in his aged breast the hope of re-entering Paris, but he did not at once receive any encouragement, despite the reforming ministry of Turgot. A much more solid gain to his happiness was the adoption, or practical adoption, in 1776 of Reine Philiberte de Varicourt, a young girl of noble but poor family, whom Voltaire rescued from the convent, installed in his house as an adopted daughter, and married to the marquis de Villette. Her pet name was "Belle et Bonne," and nobody had more to do with the happiness of the last years of the patriarch than she had. It is doubtful whether his last and fatal visit to Paris was due to his own wish or to the instigation of his niece, Madame Denis; but this lady, a woman of disagreeable temper, especially to her

inferiors appears to have been rather hardly treated by Voltaire's earlier, and sometimes by his later, biographers. The suggestion which has been made that the success of Beaumarchais piqued him has nothing impossible in it. At any rate he had, at the end of 1777 and the beginning of 1778, been carefully finishing a new tragedy *Irene* for production in the capital. He started on the 5th of February, and five days later arrived at the city which he had not seen for eight and-twenty years.

He was received with immense rejoicings, not indeed directly by the court, but by the Academy, by society and by all the more important foreign visitors. About a fortnight after his arrival, age and fatigue made him seriously ill, and a confessor was sent for. But he recovered, scoffed at himself as usual, and prepared more eagerly than ever for the first performance of *Irène*, on the 16th of March. At the end of the month he was able to attend a performance of it, which was a kind of apotheosis. He was crowned with laurel in his box, amid the plaudits of the audience, and did not seem to be the worse for it. He even began or proceeded with another tragedy *Agathocle* and attended several Academic meetings. But such proceedings in the case of a man of eighty-four were impossible. To keep himself up, he exceeded even his usual excess in coffee, and about the middle of May he became very ill. On the 30th of May the priests were once more sent for—to wit, his nephew, the Abbé Mignot, the Abbé Gaultier, who had officiated on the former occasion, and the parish priest, the curé of St Sulpice. He was, however, in a state of half insensibility, and petulantly motioned them away, dying in the course of the night. The legends about his death in a state of terror and despair are certainly false; but it must be regarded as singular and unfortunate that he, who had more than once gone out of his way to conform ostentatiously and with his tongue in his cheek, should have neglected or missed this last opportunity. The result was a difficulty as to burial, which was compromised by hurried interment at the abbey of Scellières in Champagne, anticipating the interdict of the bishop of the diocese by an hour or two. On the 10th of July 1791 the body was transferred to the Pantheon, but during the Hundred Days it was once more, it is said, disentombed, and stowed away in a piece of waste ground. His heart, taken from the body when it was embalmed, and given to Madame Denis and by her to Madame de Villette, was preserved in a silver case, and when it was proposed (in 1864) to restore it to [204] the other remains, the sarcophagus at Sainte Geneviève (the Pantheon) was opened and found to be empty.

In person Voltaire was not engaging, even as a young man. His extraordinary thinness is commemorated, among other things, by the very poor but well-known epigram attributed to Young, and identifying him at once with "Satan, Death and Sin." In old age he was a mere skeleton, with a long nose and eyes of preternatural brilliancy peering out of his wig. He never seems to have been addicted to any manly sport, and took little exercise. He was sober enough (for his day and society) in eating and drinking generally; but drank coffee, as his contemporary, counterpart and enemy, Johnson, drank tea, in a hardened and inveterate manner. It may be presumed with some certainty that his attentions to women were for the most part platonic; indeed, both on the good and the bad side of him, he was all brain. He appears to have had no great sense of natural beauty, in which point he resembled his generation (though one remarkable story is told of his being deeply affected by Alpine scenery); and, except in his passion for the stage, he does not seem to have cared much for any of the arts. Conversation and literature were, again as in Johnson's case, the sole gods of his idolatry. As for his moral character, the wholly intellectual cast of mind just referred to makes it difficult to judge that. His beliefs or absence of beliefs emancipated him from conventional scruples; and he is not a good subject for those who maintain that a nice morality may exist independently of religion. He was good-natured when not crossed, generous to dependents who made themselves useful to him, and indefatigable in defending the cause of those who were oppressed by the systems with which he was at war. But he was inordinately vain, and totally unscrupulous in gaining money, in attacking an enemy, or in protecting himself when he was threatened with danger. His peculiar fashion of attacking the popular beliefs of his time has also failed to secure the approval of some who had very little sympathy with those beliefs. The only excuse made for the alternate cringing and insult, the alternate abuse and lying, which marked his course in this matter, has been the very weak plea that a man cannot fight with a system—a plea which is sufficiently answered by the retort that a great many men have so fought and have won. Voltaire's works, and especially his private letters, constantly contain the word "l'infâme" and the expression (in full or abbreviated) "écrasez l'infâme." This has been misunderstood in many ways—the mistake going so far as in some cases to suppose that Voltaire meant Christ by this opprobrious expression. No careful and competent student of his works has ever failed to correct this gross misapprehension. "l'infâme" is not God; it is not Christ; it is not Christianity; it is not even Catholicism. Its briefest equivalent may be given as "persecuting and



privileged orthodoxy" in general, and, more particularly, it is the particular system which Voltaire saw around him, of which he had felt the effects in his own exiles and the confiscations of his books, and of which he saw the still worse effects in the hideous sufferings of Calas and La Barre.

Vast and various as the work of Voltaire is, its vastness and variety are of the essence of its writer's peculiar quality. The divisions of it have long been recognized, and may be treated regularly.

The first of these divisions in order, not the least in bulk, and, though not the first in merit, inferior to none in the amount of congenial labor spent on it, is the *theatre*. Between fifty and sixty different pieces (including a few which exist only in fragments or sketches) are included in his writings, and they cover his literary life. It is at first sight remarkable that Voltaire, whose comic power was undoubtedly far in excess of his tragic, should have written many tragedies of no small excellence in their way, but only one fair second-class comedy, *Nanine*. His other efforts in this latter direction are either slight and almost insignificant in scope, or, as in the case of the somewhat famous *Écossaise*, deriving all their interest from being personal libels. His tragedies, on the other hand, are works of extraordinary merit in their own way. Although Voltaire had neither the perfect versification of Racine nor the noble poetry of Corneille, he surpassed the latter certainly, and the former in the opinion of some not incompetent judges, in playing the difficult and artificial game of the French tragedy. *Zaire*, among those where love is admitted as a principal motive, and *Mérope*, among those where this motive is excluded and kept in subordination, yield to no plays of their classe in such interest as is possible on the model, in stage effect and in uniform literary merit. Voltaire knew that the public opinion of his time reserved its highest prizes for a capable and successful dramatist, and he was determined to win these prizes. He therefore set all his wonderful cleverness to the task, going so far as to adopt a little even of that Romantic disobedience to the strict classical theory which he condemned, and no doubt sincerely, in Shakespeare.

As regards his poems proper, of which there are two long ones, the *Henriade*, and the *Pucelle*, besides smaller pieces, of which a bare catalogue fills fourteen royal octavo columns, their value is very unequal. The *Henriade* has by universal consent been relegated to the position of a school reading book.

Constructed and written in almost slavish imitation of Virgil, employing for medium a very unsuitable vehicle the Alexandrine couplet (as reformed and rendered monotonous for dramatic purposes) and animated neither by enthusiasm for the subject nor by real understanding thereof, it could not but be an unsatisfactory performance. The *Pucelle*, if morally inferior, is from a literary point of view of far more value, it is desultory to a degree; it is a base libel on religion and history; it differs from its model *Ariosto* in being, not, as *Ariosto* is, a mixture of romance and burlesque, but a sometimes tedious tissue of burlesque pure and simple; and it is exposed to the objection often and justly urged that much of its fun depends simply on the fact that there were and are many people who believe enough in Christianity to make its jokes give pain to them and to make their disgust at such jokes piquant to others. Nevertheless, with all the *Pucelle's* faults, it is amusing. The minor poems are as much above the *Pucelle* as the *Pucelle* is above the *Henriade*. It is true that there is nothing, or hardly anything, that properly deserves the name of poetry in them, no passion, no sense of the beauty of nature, only a narrow "criticism of life," only a conventional and restricted choice of language, a cramped and monotonous prosody, and none of that indefinite suggestion which has been rightly said to be of the poetic essence. But there is immense wit, a wonderful command of such metre and language as the taste of the time allowed to the poet, occasionally a singular if somewhat artificial grace, and a curious felicity of diction and manner.

The third division of Voltaire's works in a rational order consists of his *prose romances* or *tales*. These productions—incomparably the most remarkable and most absolutely good fruit of his genius—were usually composed as pamphlets, with a purpose of polemic in religion, politics, or what not. Thus *Candide* attacks religious and philosophical optimism, *L'Homme aux quarante écus* certain social and political ways of the time, *Zadig* and others the received forms of moral and metaphysical orthodoxy, while some are mere lampoons on the Bible, the unfailing source of Voltaire's wit. But (as always happens in the case of literary work where the form exactly suits the author's genius) the purpose in all the best of them disappears almost entirely. It is in these works more than in any others that the peculiar quality of Voltaire's ironic style without exaggeration appears. That he learned it partly from Saint Evremond, still more from Anthony Hamilton, partly even from his own enemy Le Sage, is perfectly true, but he gave it perfection and completion. If one especial peculiarity can be singled out, it is the extreme restraint and simplicity of the verbal treatment.

Voltaire never dwells too long on this point, stays to laugh at what he has said, elucidates or comments on his own jokes, guffaws over them or exaggerates their form. The famous "pour encourager les autres" (that the shooting of Byng did "encourage the others" very much is not to the point) is a typical example, and indeed the whole of *Candide* shows the style at its perfection.

The fourth division of Voltaire's work, the historical, is the bulkiest of all except his correspondence, and some parts of it are or have been among the most read, but it is far from being even among the best. The small treatises on Charles XII. and Peter the Great are indeed models of clear narrative and ingenious if somewhat superficial grasp and arrangement. The so-called *Siècle de Louis XIV.* and *Siècle de Louis XV.* (the latter inferior to the former but still valuable) contain a great miscellany of interesting matter, treated by a man of great acuteness and unsurpassed power of writing, who had also had access to much important private information. But even in these books defects are present, which appear much more strongly in the singular olla podrida entitled *Essai sur les mœurs*, in the *Annales de l'empire* and in the minor historical works. These defects are an almost total absence of any comprehension of what has since been called the philosophy of history, the constant presence of gross prejudice, frequent inaccuracy of detail, and, above all, a complete incapacity to look at anything except from the narrow standpoint of a half-pessimist and half self-satisfied *philosophe* of the 18th century.

His work in physics concerns us less than any other here; it is, however, not inconsiderable in bulk, and is said by experts to give proof of aptitude.

To his own age Voltaire was pre-eminently a poet and a philosopher; the unkindness of succeeding ages has sometimes questioned [205] whether he had any title to either name, and especially to the latter. His largest *philosophical* work, at least so called, is the curious medley entitled *Dictionnaire philosophique*, which is compounded of the articles contributed by him to the great *Encyclopédie* and of several minor pieces. No one of Voltaire's works shows his antireligious or at least anti-ecclesiastical animus more strongly. The various title-words of the several articles are often the merest stalking horses, under cover of which to shoot at the Bible or the church, the target being now and then shifted to the political institutions of the writers country, his personal foes, &c., and the whole being largely seasoned with that acute, rather superficial, common-sense, but

also commonplace, ethical and social criticism which the 18th century called philosophy. The book ranks perhaps second only to the novels as showing the character, literary and personal, of Voltaire; and despite its form it is nearly as readable. The minor philosophical works are of no very different character. In the brief *Traité de métaphysique* the author makes his grand effort, but scarcely succeeds in doing more than show that he had no real conception of what metaphysics is.

In general *criticism* and *miscellaneous* writing Voltaire is not inferior to himself in any of his other functions. Almost all his more substantive works, whether in verse or prose, are preceded by prefaces of one sort or another, which are models of his own light pungent *causerie*; and in a vast variety of nondescript pamphlets and writings he shows himself a perfect journalist. In literary criticism pure and simple his principal work is the *Commentaire sur Corneille*, though he wrote a good deal more of the same kind sometimes (as in his *Life* and notices of Molière) independently sometimes as part of his *Siècles*. Nowhere, perhaps, except when he is dealing with religion, are Voltaire's defects felt more than here. He was quite unacquainted with the history of his own language and literature, and more here than anywhere else he showed the extraordinarily limited and conventional spirit which accompanied the revolt of the French 18th century against limits and conventions in theological, ethical and political matters.

There remains only the huge division of his correspondence, which is constantly being augmented by fresh discoveries, and which, according to Georges Bengesco, has never been fully or correctly printed, even in some of the parts longest known. In this great mass Voltaire's personality is of course best shown, and perhaps his literary qualities not worst. His immense energy and versatility, his adroit and unhesitating flattery when he chose to flatter, his ruthless sarcasm when he chose to be sarcastic, his rather unscrupulous business faculty, his more than rather unscrupulous resolve to double and twist in any fashion so as to escape his enemies, all these things appear throughout the whole mass of letters.

Most judgments of Voltaire have been unduly colored by sympathy with or dislike of what may be briefly called his polemical side. When sympathy and dislike are discarded or allowed for, he remains one of the most astonishing, if not exactly one of the most admirable, figures of letters. That he never, as Carlyle complains, gave utterance to one great thought is strictly true. That his

characteristic is for the most part an almost superhuman cleverness rather than positive genius is also true. But that he was merely a mocker, which Carlyle and others have also said, is not strictly true or fair. In politics proper he seems indeed to have had few or no constructive ideas, and to have been entirely ignorant or quite reckless of the fact that his attacks were destroying a state of things for which as a whole he neither had nor apparently wished to have any substitute. In religion he protested stoutly, and no doubt sincerely, that his own attitude was not purely negative; but here also he seems to have failed altogether to distinguish between pruning and cutting down. Both here and elsewhere his great fault was an inveterate superficiality. But this superficiality was accompanied by such wonderful acuteness within a certain range, by such an absolutely unsurpassed literary aptitude and sense of style in all the lighter and some of the graver modes of literature, by such untiring energy and versatility in enterprise, that he has no parallel among ready writers anywhere. Not the most elaborate work of Voltaire is of much value for matter; but not the very slightest work of Voltaire is devoid of value in form. In literary craftsmanship, at once versatile and accomplished, he has no superior and scarcely a rival.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY. – The bibliography of Voltaire is a very large subject, and it has been the special occupation of a Rumanian diplomatist of much erudition and judgment, Georges Bengesco, *Bibliographie de Voltaire* (4 vols., Paris, 1882-90). The best edition of the works is that by Louis Moland in 52 volumes (Paris, Gamier); the handiest and most compact is that issued in 13 volumes royal octavo by Furne, and kept in print by the house of Didot. Of the earlier editions, though their bulk is an objection, several are interesting and valuable. Especially may be noticed the so-called edition of Kehl, in which Voltaire himself, and later Beaumarchais, were concerned (70 vols., 1785-89); those of Dalibon and Baudouin, each in 97 volumes (from which “the hundred volumes of Voltaire” have become a not infrequent figure of speech); and the excellent edition of Beuchot (1829) in 72 volumes. Editions of separate or selected works are innumerable, and so are books upon Voltaire. There is no really good detailed life of him, with complete examination of his work, in any language, though the works containing materials for such are numerous (the first of importance being that of T.J. Duvernet in 1797), and sometimes (especially in the case of M.

Desnoiresterres, *Voltaire et la société française*, 1867 and others) excellent. In English the essays of Carlyle and Viscount Morley (1872) are both in their way invaluable, and to a great extent correct one another. The principal detailed life in English is that of an American writer, James Parton (1881), which gives the facts with very considerable detail and fair accuracy, but with little power of criticism. That of Mr S.G. Tallentyre (London, 1903, 2 vols.) is gossiping and popular. Francis Espinasse's *Voltaire* (1882), which contains a useful bibliography, J. Churton Collins's *Voltaire in England* (1886), and J.R. Lounsbury's *Shakespeare and Voltaire* (1902) may also be specified. (G. Sa. = George Saintsbury, D.C.L., LL.D.)

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